

Terrain Tribes and Terrorists: Pakistan, 2006-2008

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“The two main factors for you will be the terrain and the tribes. You have to know their game and learn to play it, which means you first have to understand their environment”. It was May 2006, and the late-afternoon sun was slanting through the windows of my cluttered office on the second floor of the State Department in Washington D.C., where I was deep in discussion with Professor Akbar Ahmed. We were poring together over air photos, tribal gazetteers and topographic maps, laid out across my desk and spilling onto the floor: a panorama of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier at one-to-a-million scale in the muted cartographic colors of British India. These were modern Pakistani maps, but not enough has changed on the frontier to justify re-drawing the old colonial map-makers’ work.

Professor Ahmed, already mentioned in the Afghanistan case study, is a noted anthropologist, diplomat, film-maker, Professor of International Relations and Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington DC. More to my purpose, he had served half a lifetime in the District Management Group, the elite cadre within the Civil Service of Pakistan that administered the tribal agencies on Pakistan’s frontier until disbanded by General Musharraf in 1999. In the 1980s, during the Soviet-Afghan War, when the United States, the Pakistani intelligence service (the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, ISI), and groups like those supported by the young Sa’udi militant Usama bin Laden were running separate networks for the *mujahidin* from safe houses in different parts of Peshawar, Dr. Akbar Ahmed had been Political Agent of South Waziristan—then and now, a stronghold of insurgency and tribal warfare. He had walked the Durand Line, the still-contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, when Soviet troops were operating just a few miles away and MiGs were overflying the frontier. I listened intently to his advice. I was leaving for the North-West Frontier in a few days— and a stint on the frontier concentrates the mind.

In the field, with military and civilian teams and local people in locations across Afghanistan and Pakistan at various times through the next three years, the wisdom of Professor Ahmed’s insight came home to me again and again. The fact is that the terrain and the tribes drive ninety percent of what happens on the frontier, while the third factor, which accounts for the other ten percent, is the presence of transnational terrorists and our reaction to them. But things seem very different in Washington or London from how they seem in Peshawar, let alone in Bajaur, Khyber or Waziristan—in that great tangle of dust-colored ridges known as the Safed Koh, or “white mountains”. This is a southern limb of the Hindu Kush, the vast range that separates Afghanistan (which lies on the immense Iranian Plateau that stretches all the way to the Arabian Gulf) from the valley of the Indus, the northern geographical limit of the Indian subcontinent. The locals call the area “the hills”—the highest peak is Mount Sikaram, just under sixteen thousand feet, a trifling height beside the nearby Hindu Kush and Himalayas—but anywhere else they would be mountains. The terrain is barely believable: razor-backed ridges, precipitous goat tracks and near-vertical foot

trails, deep ravines where the sun scorches the midday rock and you seem to struggle in a furnace, rivers that are gravel gullies nine months of the year and roaring torrents the other three, winter passes deep in snow where vehicles bog, mountain winds slash your face and pack animals sink to the belly: but then lush river valleys with magnificent *chenar* trees, where the fertile green of crops and orchards and the sparkle of flowing water soothes the eyes. And there is a scent to the Frontier: aromatic, dusty, sun-baked—hot granite, dry grass, wood-smoke and pine—that never leaves you once you have smelled it.

The people, Karlanri hill-tribes of the Pashtun ethnic group, are as harsh and handsome as their hills. Most men carry a rifle from boyhood and women are rarely seen and never heard in public, though some (particularly those of elite status)¹ are privately influential. Fierce pride, unyielding self-reliance and exacting reciprocity (the Pashto word for “revenge”, *badal*, can also mean “exchange”) are key assets in the struggle for life. The hill tribes regard warfare and pillage as forms of extreme sport, and tribal solidarity, the code of *Pashtunwali* (discussed already in the Afghan context in Chapter 2) and *shari’a* law are the only standards that count. The harshness with which men treat women and adults exploit children is often simply astonishing to outsiders. Yet these are also some of the kindest, liveliest, most humorous, hospitable and resilient people I have ever met.

Villages are tight clusters of dwellings and compounds, often located in valleys. Every house is a fortress, surrounded by its crenellated stone or mud-brick wall, with rifle loopholes instead of windows and every approach covered by observation and fire. Many compounds have a 20-foot tall watchtower or thick-walled central keep, and some have a fortified gatehouse.² Some clans have traditional ambush sites, passed from father to son like favorite fishing spots in a Western family. The young Winston Churchill, campaigning here in 1897, wrote that “all along the Afghan border every man’s house is his castle. The villages are the fortifications, the fortifications are the villages. Every house is loopholed, and whether it has a tower or not depends only on its owner’s wealth.”³

“All the world was going ghaza”

Churchill was describing the operations of the Malakand Field Force around the village of Damadola, in Bajaur Agency, during the Great Frontier War of 1897—a tribal uprising inspired and exploited by religious leaders who co-opted local tribes’ opposition to the encroachment of government authority (an alien and infidel presence) into their region. This intrusion was symbolized by the building of roads into Gilgit, Chitral and Dir, bringing British military garrisons closer to Bajaur, which borders on Afghanistan’s Kunar valley, discussed in the context of another road-building program in Chapter 2. Ironically, this increase in government presence was driven by British fear of Russian expansionism across the Pamir ranges, rather than by a desire to control the independent tribes. Members of tribal society were, in effect, pawns in a classic Great Game conflict driven by a geopolitical contest between Imperial Russia and British India on the one hand, and the desire of indigenous religious leaders (most notably Hazrat Sadullah Khan, from Buner in Swat, known to the British as the “Mad Mullah”) to cement their positions of influence. As we shall see, a very similar situation applies today.

¹ See for example the detailed particularistic study of *bibi* elite Pukhtun women in the traditional society of Swat, Pakistan, recounted in Amineh Ahmed Hoti, “Death and Celebration among Muslim Women: A Case Study from Pakistan”, *Modern Asian Studies* (2005), 39 : 929-980

² Author’s participant observation, during travel in the FATA and in Khost and Kunar Provinces, Afghanistan, 2006-2008. Fieldnotes, N.W. Frontier and Afghanistan 2006, “traveling into the FATA”; Afghanistan-Pakistan Autumn 2006 and Afghanistan field visit March 2008.

³ Winston L. Spencer Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: an Episode of Frontier War*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1916, p. 273

The Malakand Field Force fought several major battles in the valleys around Damadola, killed hundreds of tribal fighters and destroyed dozens of houses in the village, many by burning and others through heavy artillery bombardment.⁴ Following the military campaign, political officers accompanying the force conducted punitive negotiations with the tribes, according to Churchill's eyewitness account:

Mr. Davis [the political officer] conducted the negotiations with the Màmunds. On the 26th a Jirgah from the tribe came into camp [at Inàyat Qala, just under three miles from Damadola]. They deposited 4000 rupees as a token of submission, and brought in fifty firearms. These, however, were of the oldest and most antiquated types, and were obviously not the weapons with which so many soldiers had been killed and wounded. This was pointed out to the tribal representatives. They protested that they had no others... The political officer was firm, and his terms were explicit. Either they must give up the twenty-two rifles captured from the 35th Sikhs on the 16th, or their villages would be destroyed. No other terms would he accept. To this they replied, that they had not got the rifles. They had all been taken, they said, and I think with truth, by the Afghan tribesman from the Kunar Valley [who had participated in the battle of 16th September 1897 alongside the Mamunds]. These would not give them up. Besides—this also with truth—they had been taken in “fair war”.... They admitted to having sent their young men to attack the [British Forward Operating Bases at] Malakand and Chakdara. “All the world was going *ghaza* [becoming warriors for the faith],” they said. They could not stay behind. They also owned to having gone five miles from their valley to attack the camp at Markhanai. Why had the Sirkar [government] burnt their village? they asked. They had only tried to get even—for the sake of their honour.⁵

All the elements of Churchill's account will immediately be familiar to anyone who has served in Afghanistan or Pakistan in the “war on terrorism”. Honor-driven (*nang*) behavior, tribal solidarity, cultural institutions of revenge, generalized reciprocity and balanced opposition, immense value placed on weapons, the *jirga* pleading an inability to account for the actions of its young men or to control its tribal allies, cross-border raiding, religious justification being advanced for tribal militancy, rival tribes coalescing in a temporary alliance against external intrusion and a harsh and alienating government response—all these elements of “frontier tradition” are well in evidence in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) today.

Indeed, the elders' comments to the British political officer in 1897 echo the words of the Afghan villagers interviewed by Americans in 2006 after the ambush described in Chapter 2, who argued that “it would have shamed them to stand by and wait the battle out”. Back in 1897, negotiations eventually failed and in consequence the British “destroyed all the villages in the centre of the valley, some twelve or fourteen in number, and blew up with dynamite upwards of thirty towers and forts. The whole valley was filled with the smoke...”⁶

Punitive raiding, collective punishment and destruction of houses and villages⁷ are still features of life on the Frontier, though the means have changed. More than 110 years after being burned by the

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 231-254, 267-290.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 269-270

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 272

⁷ See for example Declan Walsh, “Demolished by the Pakistan army: the frontier village punished for harbouring the Taliban” in *The Guardian*, Tuesday May 20th 2008

British, the exact same village of Damadola was the scene of an alleged Central Intelligence Agency airstrike on 13th January 2006, using armed MQ-1 Predator Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) against suspected AQ militants, which destroyed a house and killed 18 people, provoking widespread violent protests across Pakistan.⁸ The strike was launched against a dinner party celebrating the Muslim festival of Eid ul-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, one of the two holiest feasts of the Sunni Islamic calendar.⁹ Though initially there were claims that Ayman al-Zawahiri was in the house or that one of his close relatives was killed in the attack, Pakistani and U.S. officials later admitted that no senior militants were present and that only local villagers were killed, including women and children.¹⁰

A few months later, on October 31st 2006, the Pakistani Army, again allegedly supported by multiple strikes from armed Predator UAVs, once more attacked and destroyed a *madrasa* (religious school) just outside Damadola killing about 85 local people—most alleged to be militants—in a pre-dawn airmobile assault led by attack helicopters. An Army spokesperson later claimed the military had received “confirmed intelligence reports that 70 to 80 militants were hiding in a madrasa used as a terrorist-training facility” at Chingai, near Damadola, but admitted that “no high-value target was present at the time of the attack.”¹¹ Some local residents and opposition politicians said there were children in the school, and contended that American warplanes had participated in the attack.¹²

Again, in May 2008, the same village of Damadola was hit yet again by another alleged Predator strike targeting Abu Suleiman al-Jazairi, an Algerian AQ trainer and explosives specialist involved in a range of European terrorist networks. At least 16 people including Al-Jazairi died when the house they were staying in, believed to belong to former Afghan Taliban defense minister, Maulvi Obaidullah, was completely destroyed. Members of Obaidullah’s family, again including women and children, are thought to have died in the strike.¹³

Perhaps unsurprisingly to anyone who realizes that western powers have repeatedly been blowing up this particular village since at least the nineteenth century, Damadola is known as a center of militant activity, a Taliban base area and a stronghold of *Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM), an organization that has recruited thousands of Pakistani tribesmen and militants to fight with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The entire Mamund area (*tehsil*) of Bajaur agency has been a key area of militancy, and cross-border infiltration into Afghanistan.¹⁴ Damadola is also allegedly a base area for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s *Hezb-I Islami Gulbuddin* (HiG), already discussed in the Afghan case study, and for the Pakistani Taliban movement (*Tehrik-e-Taleban Pakistan*) led by Beitullah

⁸ Imtiaz Ali and Massoud Ansari, “Pakistan fury as CIA airstrike on village kills 18 in Damadola”, *The Telegraph*, 15th January 2006; see also Bill Roggio, “The Pakistani Frontier” at *Threatswatch*, available online at <http://threatswatch.org/inbrief/2006/01/the-pakistani-frontier/>

⁹ Eid ul-Adha (the Festival of Sacrifice, عيد الأضحى *‘Id ul-’Aqīā* in Arabic, known as *Loy Akhtar* to local Pashtuns) is a major Islamic festival celebrated worldwide which commemorates, somewhat ironically in this case, Allah’s release of Ibrahim (Abraham) from a vow that he had made to kill his beloved son (Ishmael in the Islamic teaching, Isaac in Judeo-Christian tradition) as a sign of religious devotion.

¹⁰ Craig Whitlock, “The New Al-Qaeda Central: Far From Declining, the Network Has Rebuilt, With Fresh Faces and a Vigorous Media Arm” in *The Washington Post*, Sunday, September 9, 2007, p. 1, online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/08/AR2007090801845_pf.html

¹¹ Salman Masood and Mohammed Khan, “Pakistan Says It Killed 80 Militants in Attack on Islamic School”, *New York Times* October 31, 2006

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Jason Burke, “Al-Qaeda chief dies in missile air strike”, *The Observer*, Sunday June 1 2008, online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/01/alqaida.pakistan>

¹⁴ Interview with member of NAS staff, Peshawar, 24th June 2006, Fieldnotes, N.W. Frontier & Afghanistan 2006, p. b27

Mahsud, who is alleged by some in Pakistan to have been responsible for the murder of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on 27th December 2007.¹⁵ One might argue that, as an extremist stronghold, the village deserves what it gets. But which came first, the extremism or the punitive attacks by external powers? Clearly, the two are cyclic and mutually reinforcing.

A few months after the January 2006 strike I spent several hours in conversation with a local politician from the Damadola area, associated with the *Jamaat-e Islami* (JI), a pro-Taliban, anti-government, Deobandi¹⁶ Islamist political party. At this time JI had some representation in the National Assembly and held fourteen seats in the North-West Frontier Province Assembly (though the party was subsequently trounced by the secular Pashtun-nationalist Awami National Party in the January 2008 elections). This local leader vociferously denied any possible justification for the government attacks on the village, and rejected the implicit paternalism (akin to the “internal colonialism” noted in the south Thailand example) which he saw as inherent in the traditional government approach to the FATA:

I live only two kilometers from the place [Damadola], and I was there within hours of the attack while they were still pulling bodies out of the rubble, including children. All the bodies were of innocent local people, there were no Al Qaeda. The people don't want to be ruled under the old system by the maliks. Rather they want an elected legislature at the FATA level. FATA is the fifth unit of Pakistan (the others being NWFP, Baluchistan, Sindh and the Punjab) and the others are all governed by elected democratic representatives: FATA should be too. The people should have the freedom to elect their own representatives. America's war against the Soviets in Afghanistan exploited and used these people then abandoned them. They don't trust America, or the central government which has been very harsh in its operations in Waziristan.¹⁷

These several incidents at the one village of Damadola, extending over more than a century, illustrate some of the enduring characteristics of life on the frontier. After 9/11 some Western planners and policy-makers approached engagement in Pakistan and Afghanistan with only a scant understanding of the colonial and post-colonial history of the area, let alone of the cultures and societies in this part of the world and the deeply corrosive impact of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Afghan civil war that followed it, and the rise of the Taliban.¹⁸ Well-meaning attempts were made to

¹⁵ See CNN, “U.S. suspects Taliban leader behind Bhutto plot”, Saturday, December 29th 2007, online at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/12/28/bhutto.dhs.alqaeda/index.html>

¹⁶ The Deobandi or *devbandī* school of Islam is a Sunni revivalist movement named after the town of Deoband in India's Uttar Pradesh province, where in 1866 its founders established the Darul Uloom school to propagate its teachings. Deobandi thought follows the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and the Maturidi theology (*aqida*), favors an extremely strict interpretation of *shari'a* and includes *jihad* as one of its five pillars. Having been founded partly as a reaction against the corrupting effect of British imperialism in colonial India, it has a strongly anti-colonial and anti-Western streak. Deobandism has spread to Afghanistan, Pakistan, South Africa and the United Kingdom, and has links to militant and activist organizations including the Taliban, *Tablighi Jamaat* and *Hizb-ut Tahrir*.

¹⁷ Fieldnotes, N.W. Frontier and Afghanistan 2006, “Dinner with FATA Legislators, 24th May 2006” p. b54-55 (conversation in Pashtu through a U.S. Embassy translator)

¹⁸ For accounts of this period see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001, and *Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation-Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, Viking Adult, 2008. See also William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

close the putatively “ungoverned space” of the FATA safe haven through a program of benevolent modernization backed by modern, high-tech military force.

But there are dozens of places, and dozens of tribes, on the Frontier with problematic histories similar to that of Damadola: to think that modern Western technology, superficial “hearts and minds” activities, short-term development projects or large-scale military intervention can reverse this history overnight, win over the population and integrate them into “modern” Pakistani society without some major political and cultural transformation is simply naïve. Moreover, the idea that extending the reach of government into the area is the solution to all its problems is misguided, since external government (as distinct from self-governance by informal but robust tribal institutions) is both alien and abhorrent to many tribal Pashtuns, and its encroachment into their culture area has been a key trigger for violence and warfare since the nineteenth century, and arguably through all of recorded history.¹⁹ Similarly, to imagine that killing or capturing Usama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri or any of the other AQ leaders thought to be hiding in this area would help stabilize the situation is also unrealistic: intrusive actions, especially punitive raiding and air strikes targeting AQ senior leadership, may or may not be justified on other grounds but their effect on local stability is unarguably and entirely negative. For stabilization and reconstruction measures to have any effect at all, they would have to take place in the context of a comprehensive political solution to complex and intractable problems, something that is unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future.

The Ancestral Home of the Accidental Guerrilla

As recounted in Chapter 1, I first began to notice the accidental guerrilla syndrome during fieldwork in West Java in 1996. But its full impact only hit me ten years later, during a field trip to the Khyber Agency, a few miles south of Bajaur. The FATA, indeed, is the ancestral home of the accidental guerrilla and the place where the syndrome is visible in its purest and most classic form.

The majority of people who actually think in concrete terms about the whereabouts of Usama bin Laden tend to describe him as hiding, “holed-up”, harried, fugitive, pinned down in a hideout in the FATA and eking out a hunted existence in a cave. Indeed, the ideologically-satisfying notion of bin Laden and the senior AQ leadership as infernal troglodytes, plotting fanatically against the West from an underground lair like demons in a mythical netherworld, seems to have entered the Western popular imagination since 9/11. The reality is very different: movement in and out of the FATA, into Afghanistan and other parts of Pakistan, is relatively easy and life can be comfortable and pleasant. Most of the area is a no-go zone for government forces; the local population, while almost impossible to hide from, are also highly unlikely to turn in any fugitive to the authorities. If, indeed, bin Laden is actually in the FATA this is by choice rather than necessity: he is not hiding but veiled, cocooned in a protective network of local allies and trusted relationships.

The FATA’s population is about 3.25 million, and adding the people who live across the Durand Line in eastern Afghanistan gives a population of almost 10 million along the FATA border with Afghanistan, which is the central sector, about 1200 kilometers long, of a frontier that is 1640 miles (2640 kilometers) along its entire length. The FATA is theoretically governed under a loose form of indirect rule, and law and order are administered under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), first established in 1848 and revised in 1901. This system works through Political Agents who deal with *maliks*, (government-appointed tribal representatives), and it applies collective punishments when tribes overstep the bounds, but levies no taxes and imposes little law and order beyond the internal

¹⁹ For a comprehensive account of successive Pakhtun uprisings and violent episodes of resistance to external rule, see Sir Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans 550 B.C. – 1957 A.D.*, St Martin’s Press, London, 1958.

tribal governance system. Indeed, government authority under the FCR does not apply to any area more than 100 yards from a road. As discussed in more detail below, this traditional system has largely broken down since the Pakistani military, responding to western pressure, has intervened in the FATA since 2004. Several tribes straddle the frontier, with branches in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most run smuggling or other criminal activities. South Asia analysts Thomas Johnson and Christopher Mason commented on this in a 2008 article:

The Durand line, which was negotiated and formalized in 1893, was drawn by a team of British surveyors, led by Sir Mortimer Durand, to create a boundary between colonial British India and Afghanistan. To a great extent, the line followed the contours of convenient geographical features, as well as the existing limits of British authority, rather than tribal borders. It divided the homelands of the Pashtun tribes nearly equally between Afghanistan and Pakistan, effectively cutting the Pashtun nation in half. This largely imaginary boundary has been viewed since its inception with contempt and resentment by Pashtuns on both sides of the line. As a practical matter, the border is unenforced and unenforceable. In some places the position of the line is disputed; in others it is inaccessible to all but trained mountain climbers; in still others it cuts through the middle of villages and even through individual homes. The majority of the Pashtun tribes and clans that control the frontier zones of eastern and southern Afghanistan along the Durand line have never accepted the legitimacy of what they believe to be an arbitrary and capricious boundary.²⁰

As Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin told me in a conversation in mid-2008, to think of Afghanistan and Pakistan as separate countries divided by a normal international border, or to conceive of Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan, or Afghans in Pakistan, as foreign fighters is to fundamentally misunderstand the mental geography of the Pashtun nation. Rubin argues that Pashtuns see both the Afghan and Pakistani states as foreign interlopers in their culture area, and regard cross-border tribal cousins as fellow members of the real though yet unachieved nation of Pashtunistan.²¹ As we noted in the Timor and Thailand examples above, the definition of “foreigner” is elastic and rests in the eye of the beholder.

Infection and Contagion

Al Qaeda's presence is a long-standing phenomenon here. It is almost thirty years since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which eventually brought up to 25,000 Arabs to Afghanistan to fight on the side of the *mujahidin*. These included Usama bin Laden and the *Maktab Khadamāt al-Mujāhidīn al-'Arab* (Afghan services bureau) which he supported and eventually led, and which subsequently became the nucleus of AQ.²² Apart from a few years in Saudi Arabia and Sudan in the 1990s, the AQ leadership has been in the Afghan-Pakistan frontier region for a generation²³, and the Arab *takfiri* presence in the FATA has been nearly continuous. During the same time period, the Taliban—originating in Afghan refugee camps in or near the FATA and growing through a network

²⁰ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 67-68

²¹ In conversation with the author, Washington DC, July 2008.

²² Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, Knopf, NY, 2006, pp. 129 ff, 179

²³ For detailed accounts of the history of AQ and of Usama bin Laden see Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, Free Press, 2002, and *The Osama bin Laden I know: an oral history of al Qaeda's leader*, Free Press, 2006.

of tribal connections as well as support from ISI under successive Pakistani regimes—has established a strong presence in the same areas.²⁴

Over that time, both AQ and the Taliban, as well as AQ-allied foreign fighters including Chechens, Uzbeks, Uighurs and others, has burrowed deeply into tribal society through activities such as intermarriage with local tribes, cooption of local leaders, purchase and operation of businesses and other services, charity activities, sponsorship or partnership with madrasas, and settling of local disputes. In doing so, they have in many areas displaced the traditional tribal governance structure (described as the “tribal governance triad” in Chapter 2) and have undermined and dispossessed both the tribal establishment and the traditional form of governance by Political Agents and Maliks under the FCR. In parts of the FATA where the traditional tribal structure still functions, it does so on the sufferance of local Taliban or AQ leadership.

This is absolutely typical of the infection phase of the “accidental guerrilla” syndrome: the basic structures of tribal society had been damaged and weakened by war and population movement, allowing an opening for an extremist presence. Extremists then coopted some members of local society, intimidated others, and created a safe haven for their own activities in the area. They created resentment against themselves over time through their intimidatory behavior, but also effectively bought off local opposition through political alliances (sometimes through marriage), by bringing economic benefits to the local area, and by an appeal to religious identity and their status as guests and allies under Pashtunwali. Thus, by the turn of the 20th century, the *takfiri* presence in the FATA was well established, with strong local allies, embedded in the fabric of local society.

According to local people and government officials I talked to, tribal fighters allied with AQ have a very distinctive appearance and manner. They typically wear their hair long, and sport Thuraya satellite phones, load-bearing vests designed to carry grenades, and well-maintained modern weapons.²⁵ They often drive four-wheel drive SUVs, sometimes of extremely recent Japanese make, are often accompanied by Arab “minders” and act with swagger and arrogance. An illustrative incident which occurred in Kurram Agency highlights the interaction of these AQ-allied tribal fighters with local people.

In March 2006, a local staff member from the US Embassy’s Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) was working in Kurram Agency with a survey team, developing a road and micro-hydroelectricity program to improve government access to the area. One NAS official described the program, and the incident, as follows:

NAS supports roadbuilding in the FATA, a program the Pakistani Army values greatly as it improves their mobility and access. They complain loudly any time there is talk of cutting the program, but local contractors are too frightened to actually build the roads in the more threatened areas, and so less than 20% of projects are on track. Also, the local tribes reject the road program because it brings government access and Army presence to their areas, so NAS supports miniature hydro-electric projects to encourage locals to accept the roads – as a “sweetener”, effectively. A couple of months ago, a local NAS staffer and a survey team were in the Kurram agency working on a road and hydro program when they were bailed up by a threatening and heavily armed group of tribesmen. These men were accompanied by several

²⁴ See Maley, *op. cit.* and Rashid, *Taliban* for details of this growth.

²⁵ Discussions with United States AID mission personnel, Islamabad and Peshawar, June and October 2006.

foreigners, possibly Arabs or Chechens, who were very hostile and spoke no Pashtu. The tribesmen warned the project team to leave the area, desist from planning the project, and never come back: “otherwise we will kill you”. The team left, the project is stalled, and NAS teams have not been back to Kurram since.²⁶

Another NAS official told me that there were about 40 tribesmen in the group, with four foreigners who shook hands with the team, but then said nothing during the incident. They carried Thuraya phones, and both they and several of the tribesmen wore vests complete with grenades. The incident occurred in the part of Kurram Agency right opposite Tora Bora, and the warning included a threat to shoot on sight any work teams seen in the area. The same official commented that the Pakistani Army response took approximately 48 hours to mount, comprised a two-battalion sweep of the area commanded by a full Colonel – and found nothing, a further example of the uselessness of large-scale sweep operations in this type of environment.²⁷

Since 9/11, there has been continued growth in Taliban strength and influence in North-West Frontier Province, with some areas now completely under Taliban domination. There has also been a distinct contagion effect, with “Talibanization” of many areas in the FATA, as well as in the Frontier Regions, the portions of North-West Frontier Province that border on the FATA. Staff at the U.S. embassy in Islamabad in mid-2006 assessed Bannu, Tank, the boundary area of Dera Ismail Khan district and other parts of the province as effectively Taliban-controlled, remarking that they “have little or no access to the field, their teams have not been able to move freely in the FATA for at least a year, they have not been able to visit an actual agency or see conditions on the ground at first hand. Their projects are lagging because local staff are too frightened to go into the field, the local tribes have become hostile and have warned them off projects, and the security situation is deteriorating.”²⁸ Major Pakistani cities are now subject to Taliban influence, and there have been high-profile militant strikes in Islamabad (the Red Mosque siege of August 2007, discussed below) Rawalpindi (the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007) and Karachi (a series of deadly bombings). As discussed below, the Pakistan Army has applied a heavily “kinetic”, firepower-based approach to suppressing the insurgency in this area, which has alienated the tribes, helping the Taliban recruit. The Taliban have also killed hundreds of *maliks* and other tribal leaders in the FATA, to intimidate the others and bring local tribes onto their side. Meanwhile, extremist influence has spread into the national assembly and other legislative bodies.

This increase and spread of Taliban and AQ influence was exacerbated and, in some ways, driven by the Pakistani Army’s intervention in the FATA – urged on by the United States and other western governments – and by the societal rejection of the Army’s presence.

Intervention and Rejection

In July 2002, under strong pressure to support the international community in the “war on terrorism”, the Musharraf government deployed the Pakistan Army into the Tirah Valley in upper Khyber Agency. The Army’s primary mission was to deal with AQ and Taliban remnants who had fled into Pakistan following the fall of the Taliban regime and the escape of AQ senior leaders after

²⁶ Discussions with Narcotics Affairs Section Staff, Islamabad 22nd June 2006, Fieldnotes, N.W. Frontier & Afghanistan 2006, p. a15

²⁷ Interview with member of NAS staff, Peshawar, 24th June 2006, Fieldnotes, N.W. Frontier & Afghanistan 2006, p. b27

²⁸ Interview with AID mission staff, Islamabad, 22nd June 2006. Fieldnotes, N.W. Frontier & Afghanistan 2006, p. a13-14

the battle of Tora Bora (Spīn Ghar), which had occurred in December 2001 on the Afghan side of the frontier about 10 kilometers from the FATA. Following negotiations with reluctant tribal leaders, the Army also entered North Waziristan, and later South Waziristan, in a similar effort to mop up AQ and Taliban remnants.

This intervention prompted an immediate societal auto-immune response, with local tribes (especially the Zali Khel of the Ahmadzai Wazirs in Waziristan Agency, and later the powerful and well-organized Mahsuds to their south) regarding the military presence as an attempt to suppress and control them. Attempts to force the tribes to surrender foreign militants to the government backfired badly, as did heavy-handed tactics (discussed below), so that by early 2004 the tribes were in open revolt across key parts of the FATA in the largest tribal uprising since the Great Frontier War more than a century earlier. Heavy fighting first erupted at Azam Warsak, near Wana in South Waziristan, leading to a major pitched battle in March 2004 between the Pakistani Army and up to 400 tribal fighters. Fifty-five tribal fighters were killed and 149 captured in the battle, which cost the Pakistan Army 93 soldiers killed, wounded or captured.²⁹

Importantly, the Army's entry into the Tirah Valley in 2002 was the first time the Pakistan Army (as distinct from the Frontier Corps and tribal levies) had entered the FATA on operations since Pakistan's independence in August 1947. As such, it was not only an act with extremely inflammatory potential, but it also undermined the tacit social compact on which the FCR and traditional Frontier governance systems had been based. The implicit agreement that underpinned the FCR system was that if the tribes sat down quietly under the Political Agents, *maliks* and Frontier Corps, then they would be left alone to govern themselves, and the central government and the Army would stay out of their affairs. But now the Army had broken the government's end of the deal, attempting (at the behest of *kafir* foreigners, no less) to force the tribes to break two key tenets of Pashtunwali: *melmastia* (hospitality to a guest) and *nanawatei* (protection of a defeated combatant seeking refuge). Tribal honor and Islamic principle, especially the Qur'anic injunction against siding with any infidel against any fellow Muslim, alike combined to ensure that the tribal leaders would utterly reject these demands. The Army, also, had first broken the deal, not the tribes: why then should they remain quiet? By the end of 2004 the tribes were in a full, though undeclared, frontier war against the government. By early 2005, heavy Army casualties in the FATA had forced the government to alter its strategy from confrontation to negotiation.

The Government of Pakistan signed the Shakai Peace Agreement, the first of three peace agreements with the tribes, in South Waziristan in April 2004. It was agreed with former Taliban commander Nek Muhammad Wazir, but broke down almost at once after Nek Muhammad was killed in mid-June 2004, allegedly by a U.S. Predator UAV strike.³⁰ As BBC News Peshawar correspondent Rahimullah Yusufzai reported at the time, the peace deal did not result in any lasting reduction in violence, but it altered local power structures, empowering militants like Nek Muhammad who were seen as negotiating with the government from a position of strength, while marginalizing traditional tribal leaders:

Mohammad had his moment of glory when Lt Gen Safdar Hussain, commander of the forces battling the militants in South Waziristan, publicly embraced him in the presence of several thousand tribesmen to announce a reconciliation. Though Mohammad renounced militancy in return for an amnesty from the military, the deal

²⁹ See Center for Defense Information, *Action Update March 15-28*, online at http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=2160&from_page=../index.cfm

³⁰ See PBS *Frontline*, "The Return of the Taliban" aired on U.S. television 3 October 2006.

raised his stature in the eyes of tribal people. The subsequent media limelight made the long-haired, black-bearded militant a familiar face and a household name in Pakistan. But it was not long before disagreement over the terms of the unwritten agreement once more pitted Mohammad against the armed forces. He said he was unable to produce fugitive foreign militants before the authorities for registration. The military retaliated by revoking his amnesty. Orders to kill or capture him were issued as the military launched its biggest operation against al-Qaeda-linked foreign militants and their Pakistani supporters on 11 June. A week later, Nek Mohammad was dead.³¹

The same pattern has been evident in subsequent peace deals, with Nek Muhammad's successor Beitullah Mehsud in February 2005, and in the North Waziristan agreement of September 2006. In each of these agreements the Army negotiated from a position of weakness, resulting at best in minimal temporary reductions in violence, but at the cost of empowering militant leaders over tribal elders, further undermining the fabric of society in the FATA. Such deals also increased the freedom of action for militants in the FATA, creating a *de facto* Taliban safe haven in the area, and resulting in a spike in Taliban infiltration into Afghanistan: seasonally adjusted, infiltration into Afghanistan from the FATA after the North Waziristan Agreement over winter 2006-2007 rose by 400-600%.³² These peace agreements were formally abrogated in August 2007 after the Lal Masjid episode, in which militants occupied the Red Mosque in Islamabad and brought violence out of the FATA into the Pakistani capital, leading to violent protests all over the country (a further example of the contagion effect discussed above).

The broader approach, described by some as “back to the Raj”,³³ which Pakistani military and political leaders advocated — that is, falling back on “proven” methods from the colonial era to regain control of the FATA — also incorporates two strategic flaws. Firstly, British methods were designed to preserve the FATA as an ungoverned space, in order to create a buffer zone against encroachment from Afghanistan. The British approach was not intended to govern the FATA but merely to keep it quiet against tribal unrest.³⁴ Falling back on these methods, in the face of an organized insurgency, is unlikely to succeed by itself since the Pakistan government's fundamental strategic aim is different. Secondly, as we have seen, British methods used the regular Army as an implied threat. The tribes were pressured to work with local administrators and paramilitary forces, or else the regular military would be deployed and crush them. This bluff has now been called — the Army was deployed in large-scale operations from 2004, but has failed to crush the insurgents, destroying the deterrent effect of Army operations.³⁵ Thus the implied sanction on which the old system relied is no longer available to underpin this approach.

Weaknesses in the Army's Counterinsurgency Approach

Why did the Army do so poorly against the insurgents? Based on field assessments with the Pakistani Army in 2006, and on my reading of media and unclassified analytical reporting since then, I believe there are nine key reasons.

³¹ Rahimullah Yusufzai, “Nek Muhammad: Profile”, BBC News, 18th June 2004, online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3819871.stm

³² Unclassified conversations with intelligence and operations officers in Kabul, Bagram and Khost, October-November 2006. Fieldnotes, Afghanistan Autumn 2006.

³³ Discussion with Political Agent, Khyber Agency, and Chief Secretary, FATA Secretariat, Peshawar, June 25, 2006.

³⁴ See Akbar Ahmed (2004), *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, Routledge, Appendix A.

³⁵ Discussion with Political Agent, Khyber Agency, June 25, 2006.

First, Army operations have been enemy-focused, aimed at hunting down and killing or capturing key enemy personnel (“High Value Targets”, HVTs), and at attacking armed insurgents in the field. Army and Frontier Corps operations are focused on insurgent fighters, and aimed at eliminating HVTs and insurgent units. Protecting and winning over the population are strictly secondary to the aim of destroying the insurgents. This is contrary to best-practice counterinsurgency³⁶ which, as we have seen, is to focus on the population — an approach that, counter-intuitively, has been shown to produce quicker, more effective results than targeting insurgents directly.

Secondly, operations have tended to be large-scale, multi-unit activities. Contrary to best practice, most Army and Frontier Corps operations are at least battalion-size, with the majority of operations being conducted at Brigade level or higher.³⁷ There has been little attempt at small-unit operations (i.e. company-size and below), local patrolling or presence operations to dominate population centers and the countryside. Instead, more attention has been given to large-scale sweeps.³⁸

A third key reason is that, again contrary to best practice, the majority of Pakistan Army and FC units are deployed in static garrison, checkpoint or asset protection tasks.³⁹ This is exacerbated by a lack of appropriate mobility assets—there is a particular shortage of helicopters⁴⁰ and mine-protected vehicles proof against improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Typically, units are deployed in Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) of half-battalion to battalion size, or larger Brigade garrison positions. They adopt a defensive posture, rarely leaving their positions.⁴¹ This leaves few troops available for operational reserves (although some local quick-reaction forces (QRFs) are maintained), meaning that Pakistani forces cannot flexibly deploy troops to deal with insurgent activity (as commanders acknowledge).⁴²

Fourth, this has contributed to an overextension of military forces. The lack of reserves and the pattern of large-scale static deployment indicates that the Pakistani Army is especially over-extended—units lack flexibility, have little maneuver room and are forced to rely on kinetic strike (using aircraft and artillery) to react to incidents or deny areas to insurgents. Simultaneously the Frontier Corps has been forced to concentrate troops in high-threat areas, leaving other parts of the FATA unsecured. Several incidences of over-reliance on kinetic means, driven by lack of available

³⁶ For the purposes of this assessment, the following references describe COIN best practices as adopted by U.S. and allied forces, and are used as the template against which Pakistani operations are evaluated:

- Cohen, E; Crane, C; Horvath, J and Nagl, J (2006) “Principles, Imperatives and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency”, *Military Review* March-April 2006, pp. 49-53.
- Kilcullen, D.J. (2006) “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency”, *Military Review*, May-June 2006, pp. 103-108.
- Nagl, J. A. (2005) *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, Praeger, NY.
- Sepp, K. (2005) “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency”, *Military Review*, May-June 2005, pp. 8-12
- U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* (Draft), May 2006.
- U.S. Marine Corps *Small-Unit Leaders’ Guide to Counterinsurgency* (Draft), 20 June 2006.

³⁷ Briefing provided by Director Military Operations (DMO), Rawalpindi, June 23, 2006.

³⁸ DMO briefing, and discussions with Inspector General Frontier Corps (IGFC), Peshawar, June 25, 2006.

³⁹ DMO briefing, 25th June 2006.

⁴⁰ Pakistan’s total helicopter fleet is 153, including 22 aircraft used only for training, another 20 reconnaissance helicopters, and 22 attack helicopters, leaving a total of 89 for use throughout the country for all trooplift and support purposes (IISS *Military Balance* 2006, p. 239) Only 19 trooplift aircraft are forward-deployed in the FATA. Given the limited cruising range at altitude of trooplift helicopters, only those forward-deployed (19 airframes) can be considered to be directly supporting COIN efforts. Typical helicopter maintenance schedules result in 70-80% (i.e. 12-15 airframes) available at any one time.

⁴¹ DMO and IGFC briefings.

⁴² DMO Briefing.

manpower, were highlighted in media reporting in 2006, as well as in discussions with field personnel.⁴³ For example, on 5 June, 2006 a Frontier Corps convoy was ambushed several miles outside Miranshah using a rocket attack and possible IED, the insurgents disappearing after the attack. Two Frontier Corps soldiers were killed in the ambush; the Pakistani Army response was to engage built-up areas in the town of Miranshah with heavy artillery fire, destroying several hotels, markets and houses and killing several civilians in the process. No ground-based follow-up was mounted: the response was primarily kinetic suppression (or retaliation) leading to alienation of the population.⁴⁴ Again, this is contrary to counterinsurgency best-practice and is evidence of the tactically precarious position in which the Army finds itself.

Fifth, indeed, the overall pattern of operations is highly kinetic. Because the Pakistani Army has little maneuver reserve except its Special Services Group (SSG) — a “black” Special Operations Force unit trained in Direct Action (DA) — ie, strike operations, rather than Unconventional Warfare (UW) tasks involving close cooperation with the population⁴⁵—it tends to mount kinetic punitive raids in response to information or in reaction to incidents. The Chingai incident of October 2006, discussed above, is a good example of this. But because there is little small-unit patrolling or local presence, such information is often wrong, resulting in collateral damage and civilian casualties that alienate the population. Significant effort is going into medical civic action (MEDCAP), school construction, road-building and health extension⁴⁶, but the “hearts and minds” benefits of these activities are continually undermined by the resentment created by this kinetic focus.

A sixth problem is the discounting, by regular officers the Pakistani Army, of local assets including Frontier Corps, levies and *khassadars*. Partly this attitude arises from the Army’s kinetic approach, which leads some Army officers to judge local forces as lacking capability due to their limited firepower and mobility. Regular officers have also sometimes tended to discount the value of local knowledge, cultural understanding, and local contacts. Indeed, these characteristics make some regular officers doubt the loyalty of local forces.⁴⁷ While this could be ameliorated by training, regular officers have tended to exclude Frontier Corps commanders from planning and maneuver operations, leaving them to static guard duties.

A seventh key problem is lack of helicopters. Only 19 trooplift helicopters were forward-deployed in the FATA in 2006, leaving only about 12 available at any one time due to maintenance requirements.⁴⁸ This represents a company-size airlift capability — sufficient to respond to a small-scale insurgent incident but insufficient for extended or large-scale operations. This means that helicopter lift (essential in mountainous terrain with a limited road network, such as the FATA) is limited to SSG raids, because the helicopter base is collocated with the SSG FOB. The traditional mountain warfare security techniques of “crowning the heights”, picqueting routes, and area surveillance become extremely difficult without helicopters, and are therefore rarely done, though these are recognized as essential tactics in mountain warfare against insurgents.⁴⁹

⁴³ IGFC briefing.

⁴⁴ Discussion with Inspector-General of the Frontier Corps, Peshawar, June 2006.

⁴⁵ IISS *Military Balance*, 2006.

⁴⁶ DMO briefing.

⁴⁷ Comments by DMO and Director-General Military Operations (DGMO), Rawalpindi, June 23, 2006.

⁴⁸ DMO briefing and discussion with field personnel.

⁴⁹ Note: provision of attack helicopters (which are kinetic strike assets) does not make up for lack of trooplift. Indeed, given the tendency to kinetic operations already identified, it may exacerbate the problem.

The lack of mine-protected or IED-proof vehicles (especially in FC units) makes convoy movement difficult and dangerous, and is another major problem for Pakistani military operations.⁵⁰ Vehicles are frequently attacked by IEDs, and the response is usually to spray the surrounding area with “suppressive” (i.e. untargeted) fire.⁵¹ This tendency is exacerbated because most IED attacks cause casualties, due to the lack of protected vehicles — thus troops are angry and frightened, leading to a harsher attitude to the local population and increased alienation due to over-reaction to IED attacks.

A final, perhaps counterintuitive problem that has hampered the Army’s performance is a desire to copy United States methods. Army and Frontier Corps leaders I dealt with frequently expressed a desire to copy U.S. methods as used in Afghanistan and Iraq. They characterized these as “sting” operations, but seemed to be describing pre-planned air assault raids, based on intelligence, rather than patrol-based area dominance and population security operations.⁵² Army leaders argued that such operations would be better as they would “remove forces from contact with the people, decrease resentment and allow a focus on HVTs”⁵³. This was worrying for several reasons: U.S. methods, as described in previous chapters, rely on extremely sophisticated surveillance, intelligence, targeting and mobility systems — none of which Pakistan has or is likely to acquire; U.S. methods such as these actually proved counterproductive in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as described in previous chapters the U.S. itself has moved away from them towards a small team presence-based approach.⁵⁴ Pakistani officers also seemed motivated in part by the prestige involved in technologically-advanced operations rather than by their effectiveness in countering the local insurgency; and given Pakistan’s strategic focus on India, such capabilities were often more likely to be applied to eastern frontier operations than to current operations in the FATA.

Implications

Based on the above, it is clear that the campaign in Pakistan, since well before 9/11 but even more so since then, is a relatively classic example of the accidental guerrilla syndrome. AQ and other extremists moved into an already disrupted social framework in the FATA during and after the Soviet-Afghan war, infecting an existing problem of poor governance and societal weakness. The contagion effect from their presence (most obviously the 9/11 attacks themselves) brought a western-prompted intervention by the Pakistan Army into the FATA. The use of heavy-handed, overly kinetic tactics by troops who were mainly lowland Punjabis, culturally foreign to the area where they were operating, contributed to a societal auto-immune rejection response. The tribes coalesced and rose up to drive out the intrusion, resulting in the perpetuation of destructive patterns of what Akbar Ahmed called “resistance and control” on the frontier, and undermining the established, if loose, local governance system. Pumping additional assistance to Pakistan, without a fundamental rethink of political strategy, is therefore likely to be highly counterproductive in the long run.

⁵⁰ The Pakistan Army has M113 Armored Personnel Carriers which, though proof against small-arms fire, are highly vulnerable to RPGs, heavy machine guns and IEDs. The Frontier Corps has a total of 45 UR-416 armored cars. (IISS *Military Balance* 2006, p. 240). The UR-416 is a riot-control vehicle proof against light weapons but lacking in cross-country mobility, and providing virtually no protection against IEDs. (*Army Recognition Journal* June 2004).

⁵¹ DGMO discussion.

⁵² DMO and IGFC briefings, and discussions with Khyber Rifles escort officer, Khyber agency, June 25, 2006.

⁵³ DGMO discussion.

⁵⁴ See the official manuals referenced in Note 1, which specify the need to move away from these tactics.